

for him, and his ingenuous determination to be honest at all costs. On page 267 he declares that “just because I write openly about fears, egotism and aggression, I have frequently been called an *all-consuming* (kilometers, summits, successes, people) *Super-Neandertaler*. My claim to be sincere *vis-à-vis* myself and my readers was construed continually as me showing off.” And then just as one feels this guy really is too much, in the next sentence he says something Goethe might have written: “I know only that the word you have torn out of your soul has power.”

JOHN THACKRAY

Second Ascent, The Story of Hugh Herr. Alison Osius. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, PA, 1991. 240 pages. Black-and-white photographs. \$19.95.

I knew Hugh Herr. First, as a teen-age prodigy smoking his way through Shawangunk test-pieces. (He soloed “P.R.”, 5.11+, when he was sixteen.) Then, after the event which cost him both legs, I knew him during his remarkable recovery and spectacular comeback as the Mechanical Boy, a prodigious feat of an altogether higher order of magnitude. We weren’t close, not even casual friends, barely acquaintances. But I had a strong sense of Hugh Herr. And I can tell you that the portrait Alison Osius paints in her stunning biography, *Second Ascent, The Story of Hugh Herr*, captures his likeness with total accuracy.

Osius has honed her literary skills on numerous articles for outdoor periodicals and now is Senior Editor at *Climbing* magazine. To my knowledge, this is her first full-length work. Hugh’s story has all the ingredients for soap-opera tragedy which could be easily told with saccharine sympathy, recrimination and other pseudo-literary conceits. However, Osius resists every pitfall and does more than justice to her material, telling Hugh’s story with a forthright directness worthy of and no doubt inspired by those very qualities embodied in her subject.

Osius starts the book with a discussion of Hugh’s Mennonite ancestors who settled in eastern Pennsylvania in the early 18th century. Examining the values which shaped that culture, she puts Hugh into a context that informs his personality and nature in terms of the ongoing and unbroken tradition from which he springs. She speaks of the extremely close-knit family whose summer trips out West first introduced Hugh to the mountains. The non-climbing reader then learns about technical rock climbing as Hugh and his older brother, Tony, first learn about it themselves, as young boys reading instructional manuals and then putting their information about these techniques into practice on the local crags and outcrops near their home farm.

What becomes clear early in the story and runs as a leitmotif throughout the book is Hugh’s passion for climbing. He is driven! Virtually every other aspect of his life is subsumed in his obsession with climbing. (He even gets involved with gymnastics at school to improve his climbing.) Hugh discovers as a boy